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What is the reductionist position as regards the epistemology of testimonial belief? Is such a view defensible?

By Damian E M Milton

Much of what is generally called knowledge is socially generated from testimonial beliefs. Social co-operation is essential in transmitting knowledge across space (e.g. the Internet) and time (past conceptual ideas being used in the present), however, testimony can also be used to deliberately mislead people into accepting a political ideology, a 'false consciousness' thus being produced. This potential for deceit leads to checks and balances being applied to reduce subsequent incorrect views or to reject the justification of testimonial belief without the belief being grounded in non-testimonial evidence. The latter approach is called 'reductionism' and is associated with the work of David Hume (cited in Pritchard 2006). Through the course of this essay, the efficacy of the reductionist view of testimonial belief will be analysed, in contrast to a credulist approach that argues that one can accept testimonial belief, if there are no specific reasons to doubt them.

Hume (cited in Pritchard 2006) attempted to trace the non-testimonial grounds for accepting testimonial beliefs and concluded that where testimony lacked such independent supporting grounds, than a belief was impossible to verify and thus justify the use of. The strength of this approach is to show that testimonial belief, if grounded in independent empirical evidence, can be tested and subsequently validated (or indeed falsified). Hume (cited in Pritchard 2006) suggests that in order to have a justified belief, an individual must have acquired personal evidence of the reliability of those producing the belief. This point however could prove difficult for research into human interactions in the Social Sciences, as much of the original supporting evidence is destroyed to protect the anonymity and ethical concerns of the participants.

A criticism of the reductionist approach is that collaboration in academia is essential for furthering knowledge and a researcher simply cannot personally test every single variable that may be of interest to their studies. Relying solely on personal experience, would be like deliberately being 'autistic', in the sense of denying the importance of unsupportable knowledge gained through social interaction. As social beings, humans inevitably rely on testimony for pragmatic purposes. This is the view taken up by credulists to describe the importance of using the testimony of others to inform beliefs. For instance, Thomas Reid (cited in Pritchard 2006) argued that testimonial beliefs can be justified externally and can be counted as knowledge, despite not having independent grounds to accept them.

Academia can be seen to be based on a form of credulism. A student writing an essay is expected to show support for arguments by referencing peer reviewed literature. Without this 'evidence' arguments are seen as 'personal opinion' and often judged as having little

worth and without academic conferences and the sharing of research findings, or if scientists had to test every last detail of scientific enquiry personally, then little academic progress would be made.

In contrast to this academic collaboration is when something holds enough intrinsic value as a topic to an individual researcher, or there seems to be a gap in current thinking. This context will inspire researchers to analyse more deeply and add to the 'body of knowledge' that others can then draw upon (without them necessarily having to analyse all aspects of a topic). If something is 'important' enough to an individual's concerns, they will investigate it further (yet usually within the confines of credible methods tested by the academic community). Without credulism, academia would break down. One problem with this approach however, is there is much debate as to what counts as academically viable (credible) knowledge. It can be said that there are no grounds to believe the testimony of another, without checking this testimony against that of others (e.g. experts often disagree). There are usually inconsistencies on any topic and ones without much disagreement often are hiding a political agenda and/or are not sufficiently self-critical.

Testimony is practical and for simple factual information can easily be tested externally: if an agent asked for the directions from ten people whilst lost, they would have good reason to take an amalgamated interpretation and get to their destination (if there was consistency between them). Testimony however, is to be judged with scepticism on more complicated matters, for example if one were to ask ten expert theorists of child development there may be similarities expressed in their accounts, yet also inconsistencies and sometimes oppositional accounts given.

When analysing the use of reductionism, some issues arise: In the sense that personal observations are adapted into language or 'personal testimony', then what can be defined as a 'non-testimonial' source? One could argue that much of what we call 'knowledge' is not value-free and is ideological and related to social power, which begs the question: whose testimony should one believe? It seems that reductionists end up justifying their beliefs with their own testimony based on how they see/interpret the 'facts' (or the testimony/discourse available to them). Without testing these ideas against those of others, they do not hold any public credibility. So in order to test one's own credibility, one would need the testimonial evidence of others. To test the credibility of others, one needs many testimonies agreeing with no obvious flaws (no specific reason to doubt) and/or personally acquired evidence. A reductionist would hold that evidence must be produced from non-testimonial grounds, yet it is debatable how much this evidence can be divorced from the agent who produces it and their perceptions.

If a testimony has little grounds to support it, then an agent does not have to uncritically accept this belief. Judgements as to the validity of a belief can be suspended until more corroborating testimonies are found or personal experience can be employed. Although reductionism can be said to be defensible on purely logical grounds, it would be impractical in application. By taking a more credulist approach to testimony allows for agents to produce 'working models' of phenomena, given the information at hand.

In conclusion, it is unnecessary to take an extreme reductionist or credulist approach (leading to stagnation and gullibility respectively), thus aspects of both are needed in order to further knowledge, for example a reductionist approach may be useful in challenging the received wisdom of a potentially incorrect and yet widely held belief, yet for this new information to be passed to others, one would have to rely on credible testimony, that the recipient would not be able to test personally.

References

Pritchard, D. (2006) *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* Abingdon: Routledge.